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who is the best teacher? do different kinds of students have different preference?

Abstract

As students have the closest relationship with teachers and are observers of teacher's methods and strategies on a daily basis, it is important to understand and value their views (Beishuizen et al., 2001). Yet, relatively few studies have surveyed the views of students regarding their perceptions of essential teacher attributes (Pang, 2000).

In a study conducted in Australia (Vialle, 2002), investigating the qualities of effective teachers from the perspective of gifted students, it was found that the personal / social qualities of the teachers were more highly valued than their intellectual qualities.

Similar results were found in studies conducted in the U.S.A (Abel & Karnes, 1994; Dorhout, 1983; Krumboltz & Farquhr, 1957; Lewis, 1982), while the Israeli study (Milgram, 1979) came to contrasting findings. In her study, Milgram added the dimension of teacher creativity. The subjects in that study demonstrated a strong preference for the intellectual qualities of the teacher above the other two dimensions. Yet, it is important to note, that while using the same instruments as Milgram did, Maddux (Maddux et al, 1985) found a preference of the personal / social characteristics of the teachers over the intellectual and creativity ones.

In a previous study (1998), Vialle used semi-structured interviews and found that gifted children, aged 5-6 years, regarded personal qualities as highly as academic ones. Understanding and helpfulness were rated as the key qualities in their ideal teacher. A sense of humor, creativity, and curiosity were highly valued as well as the ability to make the work interesting and structured.

The basic goal of the present study (conducted in Israel) is similar to that of Vialle's, yet it consists of a few independent variables: giftedness; religion; the quality of extraversion / introversion of the students (which was meant to explain the preference of the social qualities). As in the former studies, the gender and socioeconomic status were taken into account.

Theoretical Background

The student's personality

Abilities, interests and personality develop in tandem. Ability level and personality dispositions determine the probability of success in a particular domain, while interests determine the motivation to attempt the task (Busato et al., 1999).

Attitudes to school subjects and to learning, self-concept and motivation may exert strong influences, individually or combined. These may all be determining factors in academic performance (Amko, 2002). The student's characteristics – responsibility, understanding, friendliness and leadership behaviours – were related positively to their attitudes (Fisher et al., 1998).

The student's motivations and feelings of competence have been found to serve as mediators between home, school, and achievement (Eccles, 1983). Moreover, the student's perceptions of their learning contexts may be more powerful than the actual settings (Schunk & Meece, 1992). Consequently, research must assess the student's own perceptions of their learning environment, rather than the perceptions of others (parents and teachers) (Paulson et al., 1998).

It was found that children can differentiate not only between a good and a bad teacher, but also among three types of autonomy enhancing teacher behaviours, and three types of autonomy suppressing teacher behaviours (Assor et al., 2002).

Correlation analysis revealed the importance of social factors in the personality of the subject in relation to learning motivation (Amko, 2002). The

relationship between openness and intrinsic learning motivation, academic self-concept and grades, grow stronger with age. Yet, by the beginning of adolescence, the social factors become stable characteristic features that are not likely to change without conscious effort to develop them (Amko, 2002).

Pupils' beliefs about motivation might not all be well founded, but teachers, as well as researchers, might nevertheless, do well to take these beliefs into account (Nolen & Nicholas, 1993) and should pay more attention to forming social skills and abilities at schools (Amko, 2002).

Extraversion / Introversion

According to Jung (1971) all human beings can be divided into two types: Extraverts, or Introverts.

Extraverts – Active, sociable, interested in their surroundings, devoted to their work, risk – takers, derive energy primarily from others.

Introverts – Quiet, are interested in their inner life and in the analysis of their experiences, show a tendency to introspection, avoid excitement, prefer books to people, derive energy primarily from themselves.

These traits have an impact on the person's learning style. They are determined mainly by heredity, and are related to the balance between the processes of arousal and hindrance (Kaniel, 1975 & the Hebrew Encyclopedia).

Students identified as either gifted or non-gifted students did not differ significantly on extraverted / introverted styles. Moreover, studies found no differences between extraversion /

introversion among identified gifted children of varying ages (Oakland et al., 2000).

In a study that investigated personality trait development from age 12 to age 18 (McCrae et al., 2002), it was found that extraversion was a stable trait. Yet, excitement seeking (a definer of extraversion) decreases in time, while activity (another definer) shows little or no decline. Yet, when temperament and personality development was investigated across the life span (Costa et al., 2000), it was found that some children begin adolescence as introverts and emerge as extraverts, and others show the opposite path.

Students, who score high on extraversion, hold more positive attitudes towards school (Francis & Montgomery, 1993). The best predictor of personal development competition was the domain of extraversion. That is why the extraverts chose highly competitive sports, while the introverts were more likely to be cooperative and tended to be more active during experiential game play (Ross et al., 2003).

Since extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experiences are educationally relevant, and have an impact on the learning style, some may argue that it may simply be more valuable to measure only those personality variables (Busato et al., 1999).

The influence of peers

Peers are influential agents of socialization and children's friendships are based, in part, on psychological similarity in the academic domain. Changes in children's self perceptions of competence are positively related to competence perceptions of their

friends (Alterniatt & Pomerantz, 2003).

The way one views intelligence – as either fixed or as changeable, determines one's stance towards achievement. Those one's who view it as a fixed capacity are more likely to enter situations, in which achievement is the ultimate goal, with helplessness. This indicates a low ability in facing difficult situations.

On the other hand, those who view it as changeable pursue higher learning goals. Those goals may require greater effort or may require the student to find a new strategy. They facilitate an oriented motivational stance in the face of difficulty (Husén, & Pomerantz, 1994).

The Successful Teacher and the Right Class Climate

The teacher's most significant characteristics can be grouped along three dimensions:

- knowledge and skills.
- teaching and classroom management style.
- interpersonal qualities (Vialle & Quigley, 2002).

In a study in Hong Kong, students and teachers were in very close agreement in ranking the most significant competencies essential for the teachers of the gifted: skills and questioning techniques for promoting higher-order thinking; ability to develop creative problem skills; understanding the nature and needs of gifted students, and knowledge of the affective and psychological needs of gifted student). There were no differences between the perceptions of gifted and non-gifted students, or between male and female teachers or students.

Moreover, in that study, teachers of gifted students shared similar views with teachers of non-gifted students regarding their expectations concerning essential competencies needed by teachers of gifted students.

Because of the similarity to studies in other countries, it is suggested that the teaching competencies for gifted learners are not culture-specific (Yuen & Westwood, 2004).

Contexts and curricula that conduce toward inner motivation rather than external control, and toward felt competence rather than objective evaluation, seem to be important facilitators of successful educational climates and outcomes (Grolnick et al., 1991).

Though the period up to the 1970s saw intensive interest in the relationship between teacher personality and teacher effectiveness, very little beyond the self-evident had been discovered about the nature and measurement of teacher personality (Feldman, 1986). Flaitz (1987) declared that "after nearly 25 years of second-class status, the time would seem to be at hand to once again consider the role of non-academic indicators, such as cognitive skills and personality..." (p. 13).

Teaching behaviours that are warm and autonomy supportive, as opposed to controlling, have been found to be related positively to student motivation and feelings of academic competence (Moos, 1978; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1944).

Previous studies have indicated that interpersonal teacher behaviour is an important aspect of the learning environment and that it is related strongly to student outcomes (Fisher et al., 1998). Highly socially competent teachers will react to their

pupils' problems with more empathy, openness and understanding (Amko, 2002). While asked to rate their best and worst teachers, students rated their best teachers as being strong leaders, friendly, and understanding (Levy et al., 1993).

The research on effective schools of the 1960s identified a school climate favourable to learning as one of the important components of improving education (Paulson et al., 1998). Children should be taught to focus their attention on their effort or strategy, rather than their ability.

Moreover, adaptive motivation can be promoted. Students can learn to explain their difficulties, describe the goals they hope to reach, and share their beliefs about intelligence and intrinsic interest, in situations where achievement is the ultimate goal (Husén & Postlethnaite, 1994).

Yet, gifted students in Hong-Kong perceive that too much emphasis has been placed on the end product of learning, rather than the learning processes in the classroom (Tsui, 1993).

Study Questions

- Is the perspective of gifted students different from that of non-gifted students relating to the valued qualities of the effective teacher? (Academic vs. social).
- Are the two groups different in their level of extraversion?
- Is there any difference between students from religious schools and students from non-religious schools (in the two factors)?
- Is there any difference among the three age groups (8-9; 10-11; and 12-13)?
- Is there any relationship between the socioeconomic status and their

- preference?
- Is there any interaction among religion, giftedness and age – regarding those factors?
 - Is there any correlation between the level of extraversion of the students and the qualities they value in teachers?

Method

Sample

The sample consists of 304 subjects – 153 gifted (79 from non-religious schools and 74 from religious ones) and 151 non gifted students (43 from non -religious schools and 108 from religious ones).

171 boys and 113 girls (the gender of 20 was unknown) ages 8-12.

Instruments

1. The Preferred Characteristics Scale (PICS) (Krumboltz & Farquhar, 1957) was used for the evaluation of the preferred qualities of the teacher. The authors reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of .88 and of .90 when the Hoyt's analysis of variance technique was used. Criterion-related validity was established through correlations of the PICS with established measures, including Gage, Leavitt and Stone's (1955) Opinion, Attitude, and Interest Survey, and Brown and Holtzman's (1953) Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes.
The instrument consists of 36 items. Each item requires the subject to select either a personal-social attribute or a cognitive-intellectual one.
2. Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck, 1976) was used for the evaluation of Extraversion/Introversion.

Cronbach's reliability of the instrument is .75.

The instrument consists of a 100 questions, of which 23 evaluate extraversion.

Results

1. No significant difference was found between gifted and non gifted students regarding both the kind of preference and the level of extraversion (through the analysis of MANOVA $2 \times 2 \times 3$ – gifted vs. non-gifted; religious vs. non-religious; three age groups)
 $F(2,280) = .69, p > .05$
2. A significant difference was found between students from religious and non-religious schools
 $F(2,280) = 14.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$
3. A significant interaction of giftedness x religion was found
 $F(2,280) = 3.77, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$

There were significant differences between religious and non-religious students in the two measures of the study. In both measures the students from the religious schools were higher – they showed a greater preference for the social qualities of the teacher, and their level of extraversion was higher. Yet, it is important to note that the significant interaction of giftedness x religion was due only to the preference of the teacher's qualities

$$F(1,281) = 5.52, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$$

Only among the students from the religious schools were there differences between the gifted and non-gifted students regarding their preference of the kind of teacher.

Overall, most of the students (85,4%) valued the social qualities of the teacher

more than the academic ones.

4. There were no differences among the three age groups

$F(4,560) = .53, p > .05$

5. There were no significant differences between the groups either by the mother occupation

$F(2,293) = 1.45, p > .05$

or by the father's occupation

$F(2,293) = .65, p > .05$

6. There was a very low correlation between the level of extraversion and the preferred qualities of the teacher

$(r = -.08 \text{ to } r = .13)$

– regarding the whole sample as well as each subgroup individually.

Conclusions

- The results of the present study like those of the Australian and American studies show that students, gifted as well as non-gifted, prefer the social qualities of their teachers to their academic ones.
- There is no relationship between this preference and the extraversion of the students.
- This tendency is more prominent among the religious students in Israel.

Discussion

Today, the basic role of the teacher is not to transmit knowledge, but rather provide the optimal conditions for learning. The teacher is supposed to be a guide and a mentor - one who is in charge of the education of children, whose job is to illuminate the students' eyes regarding their mistakes, yet trying not to turn them into rebels. As such, the closeness with students, leading to mutual trust, is much more significant than it was in the past.

The mentor facilitates the learning process by:

1. Establishing a positive climate for learning.
2. Involving the learners in planning how and what they will learn.
3. Setting realistic expectations for the learners.
4. Providing a vision of the whole learning situation.
5. Asking questions, offering alternatives and challenging the mentee's thought and processes.
6. Creating a tension or challenge that motivates the resolution of problems
7. Listening carefully to what the mentee is saying.
8. Giving the mentee a helping hand when needed.

In that kind of relationship, children are viewed as powerful capable learners who construct their own knowledge (Trapanier-Street, 2005) .

The academic qualities of the teacher are definitely valuable for the students (and certainly for the gifted ones), yet, it might be that their value is conceived as implicit, and thus, the students wish to stress the need and the significance of human interaction, even in this advanced era of technology.

As for the difference between the religious and non-religious students – it might be that in essence religious education focuses more on social values. Yet, this issue should be investigated more thoroughly.

Based on the conclusions of this study, as well as those of the previous ones, it is recommended to put greater emphasis on the development of the social skills of the teachers (their emotional intelligence and not just their cognitive skills) in the process of their training.

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